

Toronto: Mass protest against Sri Lankan state's racist war

LTTE agents attack SEP supporters

A WSWS reporting team
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Tens of thousands of Tamil Canadians took to the streets of Canada's largest city Monday afternoon to protest against the murderous assault the Sri Lankan army is mounting against the largely defenceless Tamil population in the north of the island state.

The demonstrators, who formed a 7-kilometer human-chain stretching across much of downtown Toronto, included workers, students and entire families. Many reported having relatives who have been killed or wounded during the Sri Lankan government's current offensive, which has involved indiscriminate shelling and strafing of civilian areas, a blockade of essential supplies, and a campaign of violence and threats aimed at forcing aid organizations to flee all areas outside government control.

While the demonstration expressed the anger and outrage of Tamil Canadians over the quarter-century long war, it was politically controlled by supporters and agents of the national-separatist Liberation Tamils of Tiger Eelam (LTTE). Organizers distributed LTTE flags and placards bearing the portrait of LTTE leader Prabakharan. Other printed placards proclaimed, "The LTTE is the sole representative of the Tamil people" and "The LTTE is our Saviour."

The organizers directed the demonstrators to appeal to Canada's Conservative government, the Obama administration and other imperialist governments to place pressure on the Sri Lankan government to accept a ceasefire and recognize the rights of the Tamils, although these governments have aided and abetted the Sri Lankan state in its racist war. In Canada's case, the government has declared the LTTE a "terrorist organization," thereby lending political support to the Sri Lankan government's repudiation of a 2002 ceasefire agreement, and sought to choke off financial support for the LTTE from Tamil Canadians by making it

a "terrorist crime" to donate to the LTTE or any aligned organization.

Nevertheless, the demonstration organizers handed out Canadian flags and led the crowd in chants of "Canada, Canada, Canada."

The LTTE's perspective of currying favor with imperialist governments is not just a response to the desperate military situation it now confronts as a result of the Sri Lankan military offensive. In keeping with its aim of carving out an ethnically based capitalist nation-state in the island's north and east, the LTTE has always sought to win the patronage of India and one or more of the great powers.

And in the diaspora, LTTE supporters have developed close ties to various big business parties, in Canada particularly with the Liberals.

The demonstration organizers' pathetic attempt to ingratiate themselves with the Canadian ruling elite was the flip side of their use of violence against their working class opponents.

Agents of the LTTE surrounded and attacked supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) so as to prevent them from distributing a *World Socialist Web Site* statement titled "Troops out of north and eastern Sri Lanka!"

The statement elaborates the socialist perspective to end the war and secure the democratic rights and basic social needs of Tamils and all the people of Sri Lanka. It places full responsibility for the war on the Sinhala bourgeoisie, which has systematically discriminated against the Tamil minority since independence in 1948, whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide and rule the working class and oppressed masses. It indicts the imperialist powers, including Canada's Harper government, for their complicity in the war, then summarizes the socialist critique of the LTTE's nationalist politics made by the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka.

"The LTTE's own communal perspective," reads the statement, "renders it incapable of making any appeal to the

Sinhala working class and peasantry, which it blames for the repression and war. Its violent attacks on Sinhalese civilians have only played directly into the hands of the Sinhalese extremists and militarists.

"Above all the disintegration of the LTTE and its inability to provide any way forward for the Tamil people makes clear that Tamil workers and peasants require a new strategy. The real ally of the Tamil people is the international working class—the only force capable of putting an end to the bloody disaster in Sri Lanka and developing a genuine struggle against capitalism, the source of racialism and war." (For the full statement, see "Troops out of north and eastern Sri Lanka!")

Initially, demonstration marshals sporting Tiger T-shirts hovered around Tamils speaking to SEP supporters. But quickly they and others in plainclothes carrying walkie-talkies resorted to more overt forms of intimidation. SEP supporters distributing the statement were surrounded and told to stop leafleting.

"You have no permission here. We will call the police," declared one marshal. When an SEP supporter replied that there is a democratic right to distribute leaflets in a public space, a marshal shouted, "You have no rights here. Leave or there will be trouble."

The marshals then jostled the reporter. They shouted at him and struggled to tear the leaflets and his briefcase from his hands. Other marshals approached bystanders who had taken leaflets and confiscated them. Bullhorns were then used to warn the crowd not to take any of the "pink" leaflets—the statement was printed on pink paper—and marshals radioed other marshals throughout Toronto's downtown to warn them of the SEP intervention.

This had a double-edged impact. Later in the day, Tamils seeing the pink leaflet came over specifically to get one having heard from bullhorn announcements not to take them.

At one juncture, when SEP supporters attempted to move to another section of the city they were tailed by several persons armed with walkie-talkies. Only by going into the crowded subway system were they able to shake off the pro-LTTE goons. LTTE agents continued their intimidation campaign throughout the rest of the afternoon. At one point when an SEP supporter appealed to the crowd to protest the goon tactics, a middle-aged Tamil man said, "I live over in St. Jamestown. I know these Tiger boys. They are little more than gangsters."

Fearing a political reckoning for the desperate plight in which the Tamil people now find themselves, the LTTE is mounting an international campaign to prevent any discussion and debate among diaspora Tamils about how to secure their democratic rights and respond to the economic

crisis that is devastating working people around the world. In Europe, SEP supporters and leftists have been attacked for criticizing the LTTE or in any way challenging its dictatorial claim to be the Tamils' "sole spokesman." (See "Send letters of protest: Oppose LTTE campaign of threats and violence against SEP supporters in Europe!")

Despite the marshals' intimidation campaign, several of the demonstrators were happy to provide interviews to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Three Tamil Canadian students, Athithya, Abinaya and Benita, spoke with the WSWs even as a pro-LTTE marshal lurked behind them. "We're here to protest against all the killings by the army back home," said Athithya. "We want the citizens of Canada to bring pressure on the politicians and the government. We did this same action downtown in January and it seems it has had no effect so we are out here again."

Benita added, "We have been back to Sri Lanka twice and we have lost loved ones in these attacks by the army. They are bombing hospitals. There is no food or medicine for the people. I don't know why the Canadian government has done nothing. I guess Canadians don't know what is going on. We want to raise awareness."

Siva, a garage mechanic, said, "The government of Rajapakse is a criminal government. It is not just attacking Tamils, but anyone who opposes it. I come from Colombo, the capital. I ran away many years ago when they were killing Tamils in the streets just for being Tamils. I will never forget those nights. People should be treated with human rights, whether they be Tamil or Sinhalese. This is why I do not support the Tigers. They do not respect human rights either."

Mohan, a Tamil teenager born and raised in downtown Toronto, said, "I don't know too much about what is going on in Sri Lanka. I have my own problems. I have been out of school now for two years and I've probably worked maybe three or four months since then. You just can't find permanent work. They use you for a few months and dump you. But I have a lot of relatives still over there and my mother and father are really worried about them. They keep telling me stories of how tough it is over there for everybody. It probably is. But it's tough over here too."



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